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Cyril H. Wecht: Up-close and personal with the candidates for Allegheny County Executive

Ask Dr. Cyril, and you'll get an answer of Wechtian proportions

Sunday, October 24, 1999

By Bob Batz Jr., Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Some guys like to golf.

Dr. Cyril H. Wecht happens to like going on television and discussing the world's most sensational and highest-profile deaths.

"It is *fascinating*," says the man who officially is the coroner of Allegheny County, but whose purview is too prodigious to be boxed in by such boundaries.

During his 35-year career here as an M.D. and J.D. -- that is, a doctor of both medicine and law -- Wecht has become world-famous as a medical-legal expert and forensic pathologist.

He's also infamous as one of Pittsburgh's most sensational and fascinating personalities.

You probably know him somehow -- perhaps as the Pittsburgher who challenged the government's single-bullet theory about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Or the one who provided a running commentary during the televised trial of O.J. Simpson. The one who, in a paperback he co-authored two summers ago, took a shot at answering



Cyril Wecht: Illustration by Ted Crow, Post-Gazette staff artist.

the question "Who Killed JonBenet Ramsey?" And the one who was all over the airwaves earlier this month, criticizing the Boulder, Colo., grand jury looking into that case.

Opinions? Heck, Wecht could be listed under that in the Yellow Pages. If you're like many people, you've got strong opinions about him, too, even if you're not as capable of backing them up.

Two things that have always been true about Wecht: He is who he is, and he says what he thinks. And even now that he's hot on the campaign trail for the brand-new office of Allegheny County executive, he won't speak ill of his interest in the dead.

"Murder, accidents, suicide, people killing, people being killed ... My God, there's nothing that comes near it on a steady basis!"

No, he's not talking politics, but forensic pathology, while riding in his big blue boat of a Buick between campaign gigs on a recent Saturday.

Unlike some politicians, he does not wear a name tag. Yet, as he wades into Youghioberfest in the little river town of Boston for more handshakes and *Howaryas*, many, many folks recognize him.

One man on a bike shouts, "Who killed that little girl anyway?"

"Her parents!" Wecht fires back with a wave that is genuinely warm, since -- as you can tell by the smiles that squint up his whole face -- he enjoys live people, too.

Some, including his Republican opponent, businessman Jim Roddey, have tried to make a political weapon out of his celebrity sidelines, such as his regular appearances with Geraldo Rivera. (On Oct. 13, the night the Ramsey grand jury was discharged without bringing any indictments, Wecht, via a Downtown studio, talked with Geraldo on both "Upfront Tonight" and "Rivera Live.")

The official campaign line is that Wecht will give up (some of) those endeavors and work full time (and then some) as county executive. To him, that's a no-brainer.

But his passionate personal response -- while the car rolls to the next picnic -- tells more about Wecht the man as it pours hotly from his mind and his heart.

"It's intellectually challenging," he says of the field in which he's performed more than 14,000 autopsies and consulted on some 30,000 more. "It is never dull. It is frequently original or with some new little relish." As he describes how forensics cuts to the very bone of the human experience, his voice speeds up and rises into a rant with which not even the fastest note-taker could keep pace.

Still, his argument is a convincing one, as he likens sharing his expertise to another person's hobby. "I'd like to see someone ask, 'Once you're elected, are you going to give up gardening?'" "

Besides the fact that the time it takes him to appear on the tube is much less than most people spend sitting in front of it, he says, the publicity can be invaluable, and for more than just himself. "I take great pride -- I really do; it's vicariously pleasurable for me -- when I read about someone from Pittsburgh who has made it big."

After acknowledging that that may sound "egotistical," he launches into the verbal finale, in which he reiterates how that slice of his life would not detract from the job he would do -- actually, he says "will do" -- as county exec.

"Is there something to be ashamed of? ... I want somebody to explain it for me. ... I want the most devoted follower of Roddey to tell me in what way that is detrimental!"

Be careful trying to tell Wecht anything. As his buddy F. Lee Bailey wrote for the foreword to the first of Wecht's three popular books, 1993's "Cause of Death," "He is almost never wrong, and very seldom in doubt."

In that book and in the 1996 follow-up, "Grave Secrets," Wecht expounds on the headline cases with which he has been involved: Robert Kennedy, Mary Jo Kopechne, Sunny Von Bulow, David Koresh, Vincent Foster.

As compelling would be a report on Wecht's own political career, especially now that it has risen from the floor and shaken hands with many of his old enemies. Whether he wins this office on Nov. 2, and what he does with it, will color the ultimate post-mortem on Dr. Cyril Wecht.

During his 68 years, Wecht already has left a strong mark on this, his hometown, with a record of overachievement, even if at times it was overshadowed by a public bearing that was overbearing. Mention his last name and some people immediately picture a human volcano that frequently erupts into lava-like language. And yet this man, whom strangers, friends and movie director Oliver Stone all call "Cyril," does have gentler, even cuddlier, sides.

He's a caring and loyal friend, and a loving husband and dad and now granddad. He's a real sucker for babies -- even a bit of a babe magnet, in that females of all ages like to be around him. He's also a beach bum, super-protective "Jewish mother" and really funny teller of dirty jokes.

■ Words never fail him



Cyril Wecht waves to the crowd lining Fifth Avenue while he marches in the annual Columbus Day Parade with his son David, who holds his own son, 11-month-old Nathan. David Wecht is the incumbent candidate for Allegheny County's register of wills. (Martha Rial, Post-Gazette)

Ask people who know him, "What's Cyril Wecht like?" and you get the same answers.

No. 1, far and away, is "brilliant."

Here's a guy who started his law degree *during* his medical residency, which is just one example of how he's done many things at once, and well.

Then there's "articulate." His vocabulary is legendary, rich with rare words like "diminution" and "pandemic" (in the same sentence, no less) that delight some while

leaving others scratching their heads. Debra Gates, who translated an Oct. 5 political debate into sign language, says she was stumped by a couple of Wecht's word choices, but in context she followed his message just fine. "He used '*vis-a-vis*' a lot."

Vis-a-vis other words people use to describe him, there's also "charismatic" and "down-to-earth." A powerful speaker, the longtime Democratic leader can swear with the worst of 'em and is as comfortable with steelworkers as he is with Ph.Ds. He's also "accessible": His home address and phone number actually are listed in the White Pages, and if you call him, he calls you back.

But there also are less flattering adjectives that people use, such as "bombastic" and its cousins, especially in reference to Wecht, the politician of the past.

Newspaper reporters and headline writers frequently used "controversial" back in the 1960s, when he literally burst out on the local political scene.

"Shouting Match Called Worst Since 1930s" declared a Pittsburgh Press headline in April 1966. This after Wecht -- then the new chief pathologist in Coroner William Hunt's office -- clashed with County Commissioner William McClelland over his withholding pathologists' pay until the coroner released some autopsy data.

Wecht called him "a disgrace" and McClelland called him "a silly fool" and had a policeman remove him from the commission meeting, but not before Wecht threatened to do all the autopsies himself -- and hold up releasing bodies.

Old news, sure, but representative of the combativeness for which Wecht became renowned.

He had helped get Hunt elected after he and other activist physicians crusaded against the previous coroner, who was a carpenter with no medical training. They needled him with the slogan "You Can Get Away With Murder in Allegheny County."

Also feeling the sting of those words was then-homicide detective -- and later sheriff -- Eugene Coon, who became one of the enemies Wecht would battle over the ensuing years.

Yellowed clippings, peppered with words like "embroiled," "clash" and "rips" fill folder after folder of "Wecht, Cyril" files in what used to be known, coincidentally, as this newspaper's "morgue." Some of the juiciest stuff never made print, reporters from that era fondly recall.

Al Donalson, who recently retired from the Post-Gazette, covered Wecht as a reporter for The Press. He still relishes an early news conference Coroner Wecht called about his former boss, District Attorney Robert Duggan, who, after a bitter falling-out, took to calling Wecht "Sonny."

"[Wecht] hated him with a passion," Donalson says. "He came in and the first thing he said was, 'Gentlemen, I'm prepared today to call 'Dixie' Duggan everything but a [bad word we can't print].' And it went downhill from there. Toward the end, he was screaming.

"It was amazing," says Donalson, who wishes he had a copy of the audio tape of the diatribe that a colleague still prizes.

The bare-bones (or bare-knuckled?) Wecht timeline would include:

- 1969 -- He ran and won as the Democratic candidate for coroner (a post he'd easily own for three consecutive terms).
- 1970 -- He challenged Coon for chairmanship of the county Democratic Party, but lost.
- 1978 -- He was elected Democratic chairman over Coon.

During that period, Wecht was everywhere, speaking -- up to six times in one day -- to local groups as well as on national radio and TV, teaching and consulting worldwide, writing and editing professional papers and books, piling up awards and speaking out on everything from how Pittsburghers were being killed by dirty air to how Elvis was killed by drugs.

Then, in 1979, The Press broke this bombshell: That the coroner maintained a private bank account for out-of-county autopsies done at the morgue. Wecht, who announced his candidacy for county commissioner that very day, smelled politics and Coon, who was running against him.

He nonetheless beat Coon for the Democratic nomination, and he and incumbent Tom Foerster went on to win the majority on the three-member commission. This despite the darkening storm that would include both criminal and civil trials after county Controller John P. Lynch announced that Wecht owed the county \$390,000 for his unauthorized mixing of public and private business.

Wecht maintained then (and since) that the work was training and the money was used only to improve the coroner's office. Even as the district attorney questioned what the office was doing with pituitary glands (answer: sending them to a federal program), Wecht stood his ground. As he noted in a statement in 1980, "I have never in my life run away from a fight."

Long saga short: In 1981, after a super-charged trial, Wecht was acquitted of theft of services, the only criminal charge that hadn't already been dropped. The civil charges stuck to him through 1983, when a judge ruled that he owed the county \$172,000. Wecht's appeal resulted in a ruling that he owed \$250,000. Still he refused to pay. (In fact, not until 1993 did he settle the decade-long litigation by paying \$200,000, with no apologies.)

■ Fighting on in politics

Meanwhile, he kept working as a commissioner (and he remains proud of what he accomplished). He fought on in politics as well, even running for U.S. Senate when no one else would challenge the popular John Heinz. Though he won about 40 percent of the vote, Wecht's defeat in 1982 was the start of a political slide that included losing the nomination for county commission in 1983. He left office and the next year also lost his bid for re-election as county Democratic Committee chairman.

If you thought there was nothing more to know about the candidates for Allegheny County executive, you probably think differently after reading the profile of Jim Roddey in last week's Sunday Magazine.

Wecht claimed that many were out to get him, especially the city's two newspapers. He certainly didn't seem to be trying to make friends. When Mayor Richard Caliguiri urged him not to run again for commissioner, Wecht called Caliguiri names, denouncing his "heart of sheer malignancy" and "unimposing physical stature." (His widow, Jeanne Caliguiri, hasn't forgiven Wecht, whom she's opposing as a member of "Democrats for Roddey," a group that has faulted his "personal politics.")

How much of this squabbling was serious remains hard to sort out. Among the lawsuits Wecht filed in the '80s was a libel suit against the Post-Gazette, nine counts of which were dismissed, but one of which he has kept pending to this day, 15 years after he filed it.

Still, you don't need a judge to determine that if Wecht sometimes was over-the-top, so too were some of the portrayals and scrutiny of him, including by the media. In 1982, The Press broke this expose: "Wecht Gets Backyard Trash Pickup."

"Two Press newsmen were at Wecht's home early yesterday," Donalson wrote, "and confirmed allegations that the commissioner does not put his garbage at curbside like his Squirrel Hill neighbors and other city residents."

Another thing about Wecht is that he'll let you know if he thinks he's being trashed.

He frequently fires off letters to the editor of this paper. One of the classics was published in 1995 after the editorial board did not endorse him in his comeback for coroner, prompting him to respond that the PG's "paranoid hatred of me" was a matter of "anti-Semitism" and more. Referring to a previous memo he'd aimed at "malicious editorial pimps and reporter prostitutes," he clarified that he only meant a few specific PG staffers, and noted, "I stand by that comment and apologize only to honest, hard-working panderers and prostitutes for having analogously referred to them in such a pejorative fashion."

Many have been hit by such Wechtian blasts, including Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Even the 14th Ward Independent Democratic Club, which hasn't always supported its neighbor, has so many Wecht letters that members enlarged and displayed them during their 30th anniversary party.

Those missive missiles are "a badge of honor," says member Eric Marchbein, who also happens to be the ward's Democratic committee chairman. "We're very proud of our battle relations with Dr. Wecht. But we're also very proud that when he's the best candidate, we support him."

When the club voted to do so in this election, Wecht sent a very gracious and appreciative letter.

Indeed, he's also well-known for the kind notes, cards and condolences he's constantly sending -- one of his facets that the public doesn't always see.

■ The tough gets going

To ponder "What's Cyril Wecht like?" it helps to know that he was born in the coal patch of Bobtown, south of Pittsburgh in Greene County, on March 20, 1931. Cyril (middle name, Harrison) was the



Wecht plants a kiss on his grandson Dylan Wecht, 5, while another grandson, Gabriel Wecht, 2, waits his turn with "Poppy" as the boys crash an interview with Sally Wiggin for a WTAE-TV profile of the candidate. (Martha Rial, Post-Gazette)

only child of Jewish immigrants Nathan Wecht and Fannie Rubenstein, who as teen-agers had immigrated to Pittsburgh from Lithuania and Ukraine, respectively. The couple had moved to Bobtown to run a small store, but the Depression there was deeper, and so the family moved back to the city to run a grocery -- first in McKees Rocks, then, when Cyril was 7, in Pittsburgh's lower Hill District.

As now, that area, also called Uptown, had a lot of black residents, but then it also was home to Jews and other ethnic

groups. They had in common poverty.

The Wechts lived in various, humbly furnished rental houses there. The corner where their store stood, at Locust and Marion streets, now is Mercy Hospital's lawn. Still standing is Fifth Avenue High School, where he graduated in 1948, as valedictorian.

Like his mom and pop in the store, Cyril worked hard. His father saw to it that, starting at age 7, he took four violin lessons a week and practiced for four hours every day, six on the weekends. "I really was quite good," he says, noting how he was concertmaster at school and for the all-city and all-state orchestras.

He played hard, too, at baseball, basketball and football. Yes, on these streets you had to be tough. But looking back, instead of cueing the violins, he's matter-of-fact: Their school didn't even have its own field, so the football team practiced at Schenley Oval. "We'd change in the bushes. That was our locker room."

He still runs into people he went to school with, and they remember him. Louis "Hop" Kendrick describes his fullback teammate as "arrogant, pompous, smart. But he always had a sense of concern about people."

He also had a sense for politics: Kendrick, now the county's director of Minority, Women and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise, remembers Wecht using his keen humor to get elected school president. "There are certain people who you meet growing up who you know are destined to be somebody. And you knew he was one of those guys."

Other childhood friends got to size up Wecht from a different perspective: from the Connecticut shore, where he spent summers at his aunt's cottage.

Stuart Grodd, who also summered at Milford, met Cyril when they were about 14, and he says it was a few years before he learned how accomplished he was. But even on the beach, Cyril stood out, as athletic, friendly, generous -- "the kind of guy who really goes for it."

"He had such an exciting way about him," Grodd says. "He loved to play cards. He loved to be a tomcat, fooling around." He laughs. "He was very popular with the girls. That's the only thing I resented about him."

Also, "he could tell a terrific dirty story."

Unlike his buddies, Wecht didn't (and still doesn't) drink a drop of alcohol. "He makes up for it with ice tea and *tons* of lemon," says Grodd, who adds that when they ordered cocktails, "He would order a shrimp cocktail. Because we would always split the bill."

There's a glimpse in the formative years of Wecht's larger-than-usual life, which won't all fit into a newspaper profile, considering that just the professional parts fill 50-plus pages of his *curriculum vitae*. While he says his energy comes from his mother, his career choice was made by his father, who insisted that he be a doctor.

So Wecht entered the University of Pittsburgh, on a full scholarship. It was just like him to get intrigued by law, too, and figure out a way to do that, too. Without even studying the night before, he scored in the 99th percentile on the LSAT exams ("Forgive a little boasting," he says) and started Pitt's law school full time during his pathology residency at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Oakland.

As if his class load wasn't enough, he played several sports for his fraternity, performed in plays and was president of everything from the debate team to student congress. A date meant visiting with the girl between patients at one of the hospitals where he moonlighted.

"The thing is, he doesn't sacrifice anything," says his frat brother and friend, Sam Shapiro, a former state treasurer of Maine. "Some people, you do either one or the other. He does both. Or all three. ... He just has that ability to get it all done."

Wecht did give up playing the violin, something he still regrets. But life was pulling him in new directions. In 1959, he started his two years of compulsory military service as a captain and associate pathologist at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala. He had his own horse there, "Rob Roy," that he rode bareback.

That's also where he met Sigrid Ronsdal, an immigrant from Norway. Fluent in eight languages, she'd enlisted to become a government translator. Wecht found the blonde as cute as she was smart, and they married in 1961.

Then it was off to Baltimore, where he finished his fellowship in forensic pathology and his last year of law school, both while working at a hospital.

Then the couple moved back to Pittsburgh, which he says was the best decision they ever made.

■ Outspoken, and proud of it

Most county residents wouldn't remember or care about the details of Wecht's early political career here, which started in 1963, when new district attorney Duggan hired him as an assistant DA.

Nate Smith remembers him as a young white doctor, who, later in that riotous decade, found time to march in the Hill District with him and other black activists.

"He didn't look at things through black and white; he looked at them as right or wrong," says Smith, who would walk with him other times and become his friend.

Just a few years ago, Smith attended a civil-rights protest after black motorist Jonny Gammage died after being stopped by local police. There was Wecht, at the Hill District's Freedom Corner.

"Which means he's sincere about what he's doing," Smith says. "He never turned his back."

When asked about those early marches, Wecht says he was genuinely angry about racial discrimination, especially after living in Montgomery and Baltimore.

More recent actions show that he isn't afraid to jump in for what he believes to be just. It was Wecht whom Gammage's parents hired to perform a second autopsy on their son when Wecht was a private forensic pathologist in 1995. After he was sworn in again as coroner, Wecht argued forcefully against the way police had restrained Gammage, and involuntary manslaughter charges were brought against three officers. (Per usual, Wecht remained in the spotlight during their trials, one of which was ruled a mistrial because of comments, ruled prejudicial, that he made while testifying for the prosecution.)

"He took a very principled position," says Wecht's rabbi, Alvin Berkun of the Tree of Life Synagogue. "That's one reason I think the minority groups in the city really see him as someone who will stand up for what's right."

State Rep. Dan Frankel, D-Squirrel Hill, says, "I think he's been in many cases quite courageous in advancing his priorities," such as by being an early proponent of the Regional Renaissance Initiative. "That was not an

easy thing to do. And I think he articulated it quite well" by warning that, without the new tax, Pittsburgh could become "a jerkwater town."

Vintage Wechtian invective.

But some worry that it's Wecht who makes himself, and maybe Pittsburgh, look jerky, with antics like going on Fox TV a few years ago to comment on an "alien autopsy" or shooting his mouth off at big targets like US Airways.

"He's about as blunt as you can get, and sometimes I think that backfires on him," says Frankel.

One word Rabbi Berkun uses to describe Wecht, as a Jew, is "proud." Wecht is proud of many things, such as how he transformed Allegheny County's Dark-Ages coroner's office into a national model, and how he's maintained a record for integrity as an expert witness.

To those who accuse him of being arrogant, Wecht says, "I like to believe that I'm honest, candid and forthright. ... I can understand it can be a very thin line."

He'd be much more bothered to be called a phony. All in all, he isn't very comfortable describing himself. "I'd rather people draw their own interpretations."

What, then, about that fearsome temper, those vitriolic letters and other outbursts?

Well, people have their own theories about all that.

"It's controlled. He knows what he's doing," offers his friend Shapiro, who says he, too, can use his anger as a tool "when it's the right thing or smart thing to do."

"His wrath," Grodd says, "can be turned on and off, much as you turn on an electric light."

In fact, some who've received the most withering letters from Wecht get a joke the next time they see him, so they figure this is how he gets stuff off his chest.

"He has kind of a mercurial personality," says Dr. Roy Titchworth, who's known Wecht since college and who joined him and 53 other docs 25 years ago in founding Central Medical Pavilion. They're both still on the staff of the Hill District hospital, which is now part of St. Francis.

Titchworth knows that on some issues, "he has a habit that he will not let it go." But he is one of the observers who believe Wecht, now that he's 68, has mellowed. "I think we all do," says the cardiologist. "It's a time

of age when things that stirred your cockles previously, ah, they're not that important. You don't have to win every battle. I'm not sure that Cyril feels that way" -- he laughs -- "but he does not strike out with an immediate rebuttal to anything he doesn't agree with."

Actually, Wecht does not rebut that. Obviously, he's more "mature" than he was as a young buck, he says, but not less fiery. "If I'm attacked, I respond."

Speaking of which, it might be illuminating to talk with some of Wecht's enemies, but they're not easy to find. Some who once topped his "enemies list" -- including county Controller (and Common Pleas Court candidate) Frank Lucchino, who doggedly pursued the county's \$252,416 civil surcharge against him -- now are publicly friends. Frankel, who knows Wecht's reputation for being "divisive at times," also knows -- as one of the Democratic reps who didn't support him in the primary but who now do -- that he "has the ability to pull people together."

Especially around an election, politics can be a tangled web. For the years when Wecht chaired the county Democratic Committee, he didn't speak to his vice-chairwoman, Jean Milko (an associate of his archenemy Coon). In fact, Milko, who is still vice chair as well as county jury commissioner, recalls that Wecht wouldn't even provide her a chair to sit on at meetings, so she'd have to bring her own.

But "even when we weren't working together, I still felt that he had a fabulous mind." She says they've been friendly for years.

Love him or love to hate him, Wecht is a great guest to have on your TV show because of his sense of humor, says John McIntire. He's had Wecht on his local PCNC cable show, "NightTalk," more than a dozen times over the past three years, including once a few weeks ago with his opponent Jim Roddey.

They were civil, despite McIntire's best efforts to generate sparks, which included teasing the coroner about how relaxing it must be to chop up bodies at night.

Yes, Wecht zinged back, narrowing his eyes, "especially if I could pick *certain* bodies."

"He doesn't suffer fools gladly," says McIntire. "And yet, he puts up with me."

He has been the recipient of Wecht's ire (and a letter, too). On the night after the primary election, both county executive candidates were supposed to have been on his show, but Wecht instead turned up on "Rivera Live." So McIntire and Roddey turned on that show and watched and poked a little fun. Wecht was not amused.

Geraldo did not respond to requests for comment on his frequent guest. But McIntire says, "I do think [Wecht] enjoys the fact that he gets to step out of character." Wecht still can get on that deadly serious roll when he's passionate about something, whether it's JonBenet or his own ability to do as much as he wants. "I like when he goes off, just becomes super Cyril for a few minutes," McIntire says. "He gets into the Cyril Zone."

■ Family and friends

"What you see is what you get," they say about Dr. Cyril Wecht. One constant is the fervor with which he throws himself into everything.

Just watch him, if you can keep up (and this isn't a crack on his driving, which causes even campaign volunteers to shout warnings like, "Buckle your seat belt!").

Even when he's not on the morning-to-night campaign trail, he's on the go -- a dynamo who takes the stairs, never the elevator, from his reserved parking spot up to his office on the second floor of the coroner's office. First, he sweeps through the autopsy room, stopping to confer with some of his 135 employees who, on a recent morning, are examining two sawed-open bodies.

Then it's into his high-ceilinged office -- its few adornments include a black-and-white portrait of JFK behind his desk -- to sort out all the articles he's clipped.

A voracious reader, he likes to start the day with his wife, Sigrid, in their lovely brick home on Darlington Road near Schenley Park, reading the PG, the Tribune-Review and The New York Times. Breakfast is maybe half a bagel and a cup of coffee.

He doesn't like to get up too early -- 7 or 7:30 or so -- especially these days, when he stays up late watching the news and catching up on paperwork in bed, which he calls "my desk."

"I don't like to punch a clock, and I'm very happy about the fact that I don't have to," he says.

But while he doesn't like "rigidity" and "officialism without sense," you can see his staff "hup two" when the boss is around. Especially when he's in a foul mood.

Lunch usually is on the run. His favorite? Toni Lankiewicz, who for years has served him and others at the Central Hospital doctors' dining room there, says it's tuna on toasted rye, with lettuce, tomato and lots of cheese. These days, he usually gets it to go, she says, but he "always has time to stop in and spend maybe a few minutes and ask how you are. Interested, really, is I guess the word you could use. Interested in the

everyday people."

His own everyday routine has been suspended by the demands of campaigning, but the other weekend he managed to get in some tennis with his wife and one of the couples they regularly play. After a typical day at work, he likes to stop at the Jewish Community Center and swim, "take some steam" and kibitz with the guys.

He and Sigrid frequently eat out, from Union Grill to Le Mont, where he will forgo potatoes so he can indulge his sweet tooth with dessert. Afterward, it's maybe a movie at the Waterworks mall. He loves all kinds of movies.

They also love to travel -- they've been to some 75 countries -- and take vacations with their four children. They have season tickets to Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh Broadway Series, the Three Rivers Lecture Series and the Steelers. But his favorite place -- the place where he is most relaxed -- is the beach, which is where he gets the great tan he frequently sports.

He owns houses in Connecticut, right where he spent his boyhood summers, as well as in Boca Raton, Fla., and is generous in letting friends use both.

Despite differentiating himself from "Diamond Jim" Roddey in the campaign, Wecht isn't too bad off. In May, he disclosed that, in addition to the \$51,925 he made as coroner in 1998, his Wecht & Pathology Associates Inc. paid him \$600,000 for consultations, private autopsies and books (yep, he's planning another).

He'll tell you that he earns every penny and doesn't get paid for talking to the media.

Ask him, "What's your biggest achievement?" and he doesn't even need to think. "Seriously, without getting too maudlin, I think the greatest single success is having a great marriage and four great kids."

Despite having gone off to Ivy League colleges and professions they could practice anywhere, all four of his children live in Pittsburgh: David, 38, who's also campaigning to keep his job as county register of wills; Daniel, 37, a neurosurgeon; Ben, 34, who works in advertising; and Ingrid, 31, an obstetrician-gynecologist.

Photos with the five (soon to be seven) grandchildren make great campaign material, sure. But everything about Wecht says he means it -- even when he's on the car phone between campaign stops. After swearing good-naturedly at his future son-in-law, he talks baby talk to Ingrid, going over ideas for their wedding next year.

"Ridiculous," David sighs, with a roll of his eyes, from the back seat,

where he's poring over the packed schedule for today.

Lest anyone think he is just acting warm and fuzzy, well, Wecht doesn't act, even with a PG reporter in tow (though it is unusual for a campaign volunteer to be behind the wheel). In fact, earlier in the day, Wecht yelled at David when they disagreed about the directions David gave their chauffeur in the Hill District after the Afro-American Heritage Parade.

Giving directions to Dr. Cyril Wecht? Probably not a good idea, especially when you're on his turf.

Wecht's wife, Sigrid -- like David, an attorney in the Wecht Law Firm but, like the rest of the family, less political -- declined to be interviewed ("I don't like talking to reporters"). She did once tell a friend that Cyril is more of a Jewish mother than she is.

The kids really dished the dirt on their dad: Under relaxed questioning in the art- and artifact-decorated living room where they grew up, Ben admitted that their father was sometimes "heavy-handed" -- specifically in insisting all through college that the siblings stay in touch.

He imitates him -- "Have you talked to Ingrid?" -- and grins. These days, they confirm, Dad calls each of them every day.

Wecht takes great pride that while they were growing up, he was home on time for dinner almost every night and made it to their games and such. Now he's reaping what he calls blessings.

Just listen to the happy cacophony of the whole family sitting down to brunch on a recent Sunday, as they always do.

The chaos is more crazy than usual, what with Sally Wiggin and a WTAE-TV crew here to tape an interview. The phone rings, and it's singer Phoebe Snow. "She has an interest in the Ramsey case," Wecht reveals, then admits that he doesn't know much about her and asks whether inviting her to Pittsburgh will help get him elected.

He jokes a lot -- about how much he had to pay to get the JonBenet story to break so near Nov. 2. He jokes about pre-arranging this morning's moment when three grandkids interrupted the TV interview to swarm their beloved "Poppy."

But when the lights and camera are on him, Dr. Cyril H. Wecht gets intensely serious about why he wants to be county executive, a job he doesn't need but one he considers to be "a need, a challenge and an opportunity" to improve life in the place he and his family have chosen to be.

"I really believe a STRONG individual LEADER can accomplish a

GREAT DEAL," he says, in his strong individual way, and he's off, his voice speeding up and rising into a rant that winds around to ripping into Roddey.

The last word on Cyril Wecht? Well, there is another one that's used a lot by people all along the opinion scale, but let's let Jean Milko say it with a laugh: "He's an *amazing* individual."

Bob Batz Jr. is a Post-Gazette staff writer, Ted Crow is a staff artist, and Martha Rial is a staff photographer.

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